

Message Text

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AMEMBASSY PRETORIA

AMEMBASSY DAR ES SALAAM

AMECMFBXGXRUSSELS

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY BUJUMBURA

AMEMBASSY KIGALI

AMEMBASSY BANGUI

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 KINSHASA 5843

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E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PINS, CG

SUBJECT: POLITICAL STABILITY OF MOBUTU'S REGIME

1. SUMMARY: ZAIRE'S CONTINUING ECONOMIC CRISIS HAS SERVED TO ERODE PUBLIC SUPPORT OF MOBUTU'S REGIME AND CONFIDENCE IN HIS LEADERSHIP. MOBUTU HAS TRIED TO MINIMIZE ADVERSE POLITICAL REACTION BY MOVING SLOWLY IN IMPLEMENTING DIFFICULT REFORMS; BUT, IN DOING SO HE RISKS PROLONGING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THEREBY CREATING EVEN GREATER POLITICAL PROBLEMS LATER ON. DESPITE HIS WEAKENED POSITION, MOBUTU DOES NOT FACE ANY SERIOUS ORGANIZED OPPOSITION AND HIS REGIME SEEMS REASONABLY SECURE FOR THE TIME BEING. WHETHER IT WILL REMAIN SO WILL DEPEND LARGELY ON

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FUTURE ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND MOBUTU'S ABILITY TO ASSERT FORCEFUL

LEADERSHIP. END SUMMARY.

2. DURING THE PAST SIX MONTHS WE HAVE REPORTED THE CONTINUING DETERIORATION OF ZAIRE'S ECONOMIC SITUATION AND MOBUTU'S EFFORTS TO COPE WITH IT. THESE EFFORTS HAVE CONSISTED PRIMARILY OF IMPLEMENTING A SERIES OF REFORM MEASURES, WORKED OUT WITH THE IMF, DESIGNED TO BRING ORDER OUT OF ZAIRE'S CHAOTIC FINANCES AND ENABLE THE ECONOMY TO SURVIVE AND EVENTUALLY RECOVER FROM THE CURRENT CRISIS. THE DILEMMA WHICH MOBUTU HAS FACED FROM THE BEGINNING OF THIS PAINFUL PROCESS IS WHETHER HE CAN SURVIVE POLITICALLY IF HE SUBJECTS THE NATION, INCLUDING PARTICULARLY THOSE NUMEROUS ELEMENTS WHICH SUPPORT HIS REGIME IN RETURN FOR A PRIVILEGED STATUS, TO THE FULL DOSAGE OF STRONG MEDICINE PRESCRIBED FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY. CONVERSELY, IF MOBUTU SHOULD DECIDE THE POLITICAL RISKS ARE IN FACT TOO GREAT, WILL HIS FAILURE TO IMPLEMENT THE REFORMS SIMPLY PROLONG AND EXACERBATE THE NATION'S ECONOMIC ILLS AND THEREBY CREATE POLITICAL RISKS TO HIS REGIME OF EQUAL OR EVEN GREATER MAGNITUDE?

3. MOBUTU'S ACTIONS TO DATE REFLECT AN ATTEMPT TO AVOID EITHER OF THESE EXTREMES BY MOVING AHEAD CAUTIOUSLY IN IMPLEMENTING REFORM. THIS CAUTION HAS MEANT SIGNIFICANT DELAYS IN DOING WHAT HAS TO BE DONE: FIRST IN DELAYING ADOPTION OF THE IMF PROGRAM AND THEN IN MOVING SLOWLY IN ITS IMPLEMENTATION. WHILE THIS FAILURE TO MOVE QUICKLY MAY HAVE BEEN THE BETTER PART OF WISDOM FROM THE SHORT-TERM POLITICAL STANDPOINT, IT HAS RESULTED IN FURTHER DETERIORATION OF ECONOMIC CONDITIONS WHICH MOBUTU MUST EVENTUALLY OVERCOME WITH THE CONCURRENT RISK OF EVEN DEEPER POLITICAL TROUBLE IN THE LONGER TERM.

4. THERE IS NO QUESTION THAT POPULAR DISCONTENT WITH MOBUTU'S LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN STEADILY RISING AS THE ECONOMY CONTINUES TO FLOUNDER. THE MAN IN THE STREET FEELS INCREASINGLY SQUEEZED AS PRICES FOR VIRTUALLY EVERYTHING CONTINUE TO INCREASE FAR MORE RAPIDLY THAN HIS PAYCHECK. AS HIS PURCHASING POWER AND OVERALL STANDARD OF LIVING FALL, AND AS HIS FRUSTRATIONS RISE, HE INEVITABLY LOOKS TO THE GOVERNMENT TO "DO SOMETHING." HE IS INCREASINGLY AWARE THAT MOBUTU'S ILL-CONCEIVED POLICIES OF ZAIRIANIZATION AND RADICALIZATION HAVE CONTRIBUTED FUNDAMENTALLY TO THE PRESENT ECONOMIC CRISIS; CONVERSELY, HE IS INCREASINGLY

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SKEPTICAL OF THE GOVERNMENT'S SIMPLISTIC EXPLANATION THAT ZAIRE IS MERELY A VICTIM OF WORLD RECESSION AND THE DRASTIC FALL IN COPPER PRICES. AS THE CRISIS HAS PERSISTED, THE CREDIBILITY OF THE REGIME, AND MOBUTU'S PERSONAL IMAGE AS A LEADER, HAVE SUFFERED SERIOUS EROSION AMONG THE POPULACE. CRITICISM OF MOBUTU'S REGIME IS PROBABLY MORE PREVALENT AND OPEN NOW THAN AT ANY OTHER TIME SINCE HE TOOK POWER MORE THAN TEN YEARS AGO.

5. THE PUBLIC'S FRUSTRATION WITH THE GOVERNMENT'S APPARENT IN-ABILITY TO COPE WITH THE ECONOMY IS COMPOUNDED BY A GROWING RE-SENTMENT OF OFFICIAL CORRUPTION, PARTICULARLY AT THE HIGHER LEVELS OF THE GOVERNMENT AND PARTY. AS THE RANK AND FILE FEEL INCREASING-LY PINCHED, THERE IS AN INCREASING TENDENCY TO FOCUS ON THE CON-TRASTING LIFE-STYLE OF THE ZAIRIAN "FAT CATS" AS EPITOMIZED BY THE FLEETS OF OFFICIAL MERCEDES SEDANS AND RECURRENT REPORTS OF MOBUTU'S UNCLE LITHO DIPPING INTO THE PUBLIC TREASURY. WHILE OFFICIAL CORRUPTION IS NOTHING NEW IN ZAIRE (OR IN MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, FOR THAT MATTER) IT TENDS TO STAND IN SHARPER RELIEF AND AROUSE MORE WIDESPREAD CRITICISM AT A TIME WHEN THE LEADER-SHIP IS CALLING FOR NATIONAL AUSTERITY AND A RETURN TO "REVOLUTIONARY MORALITY."

6. TO DATE POPULAR DISSATISFACTION DOES NOT SEEM TO HAVE CRYSTALLIZED INTO ANY SIGNIFICANT ORGANIZED OPPOSITION TO THE MOBUTU REGIME. RECENT REPORTS DO INDICATE A GROWING DISCIPLINE AND MORALE PROBLEM AMONG ZAIRIAN MILITARY (FAZ) OFFICERS AND ENLISTED MEN. REASONS FOR THIS SEEM TO VARY: UNHAPPINESS WITH THE ECONOMIC SITUATION AND MORE SPECIFICALLY ITS EFFECTS ON CONDITIONS IN THE SERVICES; POPULAR BELIEF THAT FAZ'S POOR PERFORMANCE IN ANGOLA CONTRIBUTED TO THE DEFEAT OF FRIENDLY FORCES THERE; STRONG DISSATISFACTION WITH NORTH KOREAN TRAINING OF WHAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE AN ELITE KAMANYOLA DIVISION. MOBUTU HAS TAKEN SEVERAL STEPS TO SHAKE UP THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN RECOGNITION OF THESE PROBLEMS IN THE FAZ. THESE INCLUDE THE REMOVAL OF GENERAL MOLONGYA (WHO WAS UNPOPULAR WITH HIS FELLOW OFFICERS) AS DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF DEFENSE, THE INCREASE IN COMMAND AUTHORITY GIVEN TO CAPTAIN-GENERAL BUMBA, AND OTHER CHANGES IN COMMAND POSITIONS. IN GENERAL, MOBUTU HAS BEEN CAREFUL TO TAKE CARE OF THE MILITARY AND THEREBY RETAIN ITS SUPPORT -- OR AT LEAST AVOID ANY SERIOUS ALIENATION. TO DATE HIS EFFORTS IN THIS REGARD SEEM TO HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL.

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INFO AMEMBASSY LUSAKA

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

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LIMDIS

DEPT REPEAT OTHER POSTS AS DESIRED.

7. MOBUTU'S SECURITY SERVICES ARE HEADED BY LOYAL ASSOCIATES WHO ARE ACTIVE AND EFFICIENT IN REPORTING ON POLITICAL DISSIDENCE AND GRIEVANCES AGAINST THE REGIME AND ON PLANS OF THE SMALL PRP REBEL GROUP IN KIVU. THEY ALSO FOLLOW CAREFULLY THE ACTIVITIES OF GIZENGA AND OTHER EXILES. IN GENERAL, MOBUTU IS KEPT FAIRLY ACCURATELY INFORMED BY THE CND, GENDARMERIE AND OTHER SOURCES ABOUT POLITICAL CONDITIONS THROUGHOUT ZAIRE. WE ARE UNAWARE OF ANY SERIOUS DISSIDENCE WITHIN THE RANKS OF THESE ORGANIZATIONS.

8. IF SERIOUS TROUBLE IS TO COME, IT IS MORE LIKELY TO STEM FROM GRIEVANCES OF WORKERS AND PERHAPS ALSO STUDENTS IN THE URBAN AREAS. KINSHASA, WITH ITS MORE THAN TWO MILLION INHABITANTS AND LARGE NUMBERS OF SALARIED WORKERS, IS OF COURSE A POTENTIAL
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FLASHPOINT FOR ANTI-REGIME ACTIVITY. SO FAR, HOWEVER, THERE HAVE BEEN ONLY A FEW BRIEF WORK STOPPAGES AND STUDENT STRIKES IN THE CAPITAL. THESE HAVE BEEN RELATED PRIMARILY TO LOW PAY, HIGH PRICES AND OTHER BREAD-AND-BUTTER ISSUES. THERE HAS ALSO BEEN SPORADIC DISTRIBUTION OF ANTI-MOBUTU TRACTS IN KINSHASA AND AT THE MAIN UNIVERSITY CAMPUS. MORE WORRISOME FOR THE REGIME, HOWEVER, IS THE SITUATION IN THE DISTANT SHABA REGION, ZAIRE'S COPPERBELT WHERE SENTIMENT AGAINST THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN MORE PREVALENT AND VOCAL THAN IN MANY OTHER REGIONS. RECENT

STRIKES THERE AMONG WORKERS AT GECAMINES, THE NATIONAL COPPER COMPANY, AND IN THE STATE-OWNED RAILWAY ARE PROBABLY OF GREATER CONCERN TO THE GOVERNMENT BECAUSE OF THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE TO ZAIRE'S FRAGILE ECONOMY OF MAINTAINING MINERALS PRODUCTION AT MAXIMUM LEVELS POSSIBLE. ANY PROLONGED STOPPAGE COULD HAVE DISASTROUS ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ENTIRE COUNTRY. HENCE MOBUTU MOVED QUICKLY TO PLACATE WORKERS WHEN THE STRIKES BROKE OUT SEVERAL WEEKS AGO. HOWEVER HE HAS SINCE WARNED PUBLICLY THAT HE WILL NOT TOLERATE FURTHER STRIKES, THUS RAISING THE SPECTRE OF A SERIOUS CONFRONTATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT FORCES AND WORKERS IF -- AS HAS BEEN RECENTLY REPORTED -- THE LATTER AGAIN SEEK TO BACK UP THEIR DEMANDS BY WALKING OFF THE JOB. EVEN THOUGH THE COPPER WORKERS ARE GENERALLY BETTER PAID THAN THEIR PEERS IN OTHER SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY, THE INDISPENSABILITY OF THE COPPER INDUSTRY TO MOBUTU'S SURVIVAL GIVES THEM A DEGREE OF POLITICAL LEVERAGE WHICH THEY COULD SEEK TO EXPLOIT FURTHER.

9. WE HAVE LITTLE DOUBT THAT MOBUTU UNDERSTANDS THE DIMENSIONS OF HIS ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND THE DANGEROUS POLITICAL FORCES THEY COULD SPAWN. HE HAS WADED THROUGH A LOT OF TROUBLED WATERS IN THE PAST, AND IN THE PROCESS HE HAS SUCCESSFULLY ELIMINATED OR NEUTRALIZED HIS MAJOR POLITICAL OPPONENTS AND BROUGHT TO THE COUNTRY A DEGREE OF UNITY AND STABILITY IT HAD NEVER KNOWN BEFORE. THIS IS WIDELY RECOGNIZED AND IS AN IMPORTANT REASON WHY TODAY, AFTER A YEAR AND HALF OF ECONOMIC CRISIS AND MILITARY/POLITICAL SETBACK IN NEIGHBORING ANGOLA, OPPOSITION IS NOT GREATER THAN IT IS AND REMAINS FRAGMENTED WITH NO SINGLE CHALLENGER OR ORGANIZED POLITICAL FORCE EMERGING TO SERVE AS A RALLYING POINT FOR THE DISAFFECTED. FROM TIME TO TIME ONE HEARS REFERENCES TO GIZENGA OR TO THE PRP. BUT THE FACT REMAINS THERE IS NOBODY WAITING IN THE WINGS TO TAKE OVER POWER; AND THE REALIZATION THAT WHOMEVER MIGHT SUCCEED MOBUTU WOULD HAVE TO WRESTLE WITH THE SAME
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ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES AND PURSUE THE SAME UNPOPULAR MEASURES ALSO SERVES AS A SIGNIFICANT DETERRENT TO THOSE WHO MIGHT CONTEMPLATE AN ABRUPT CHANGE.

10. WHILE WE THEREFORE BELIEVE MOBUTU'S REGIME IS REASONABLY SECURE AT PRESENT, THIS IS NOT TO SUGGEST THAT IT WILL NECESSARILY REMAIN SO. HE STILL HAS NOT COME TO GRIPS WITH SOME OF THE ECONOMY'S MORE CRITICAL PROBLEMS, INCLUDING INFLATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT AND A MASSIVE DECAY IN THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR. NOR HAS HE FOUND A WAY TO CURB THE EXCESSES OF THE LARGE, PRIVILEGED ELITE SURROUNDING HIS REGIME AND THEREBY MOLLIFY PUBLIC RESENTMENT -- WITHOUT, HOWEVER, DESTROYING THE LOYALTY AND IMPORTANT POLITICAL SUPPORT WHICH HE DERIVES FROM THIS ELITE. WHILE MOBUTU CAN TAKE CREDIT FOR PUBLICLY ADDRESSING THESE AND OTHER SENSITIVE ISSUES IN HIS MAY AND JUNE SPEECHES, HIS FAILURE TO PROMISE EFFECTIVE ACTION DETRACTED SERIOUSLY FROM THE FAVORABLE IMPACT HE OBVIOUSLY

HOPED TO ACHIEVE. OVERALL REACTION TO THESE RECENT EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH A CONVINCING DIALOGUE WITH THE PEOPLE SEEMS TO BE ESSENTIALLY ONE OF CYNICISM AND APATHY: "MORE OF THE SAME OLD WORDS BUT STILL NO ACTION". NEVERTHELESS, MOBUTU -- ALWAYS THE SKILLED POLITICIAN AND CRAFTY PRAGMATIST -- CAN BE EXPECTED TO TAILOR HIS ACTIONS CAREFULLY TO MEET POLITICAL NEEDS. HENCE HIS CURRENT VISIT TO THE SHABA REGION CAN BE READ AS AN EFFORT TO ASSERT HIS AUTHORITY, AND IF REQUIRED TO PLACATE DISAFFECTED ELEMENTS, IN A KEY AREA THAT IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY RESISTIVE. HE WILL PROBABLY HAVE TO MAKE SIMILAR PERSONAL APPEARANCES ELSEWHERE IN THE INTERIOR -- INCLUDING THE POTENTIALLY VOLATILE KASAI -- IF HE IS TO REFURBISH HIS TARNISHED IMAGE AS A FORCEFUL, EFFECTIVE LEADER, IN CLOSE TOUCH WITH HIS PEOPLE IN A TIME OF NEED.

11. TO SUM UP, WE DO NOT BELIEVE MOBUTU'S CURRENT POLITICAL TROUBLES ARE LIKELY TO DEVELOP IN THE NEAR FUTURE INTO A DECISIVE THREAT TO THE SURVIVAL OF HIS REGIME. IN THE LONG RUN, HOWEVER, WE FORESEE RISKS OF FURTHER EROSION OF HIS POLITICAL POSITION IF THE CURRENT ECONOMIC DETERIORATION IS NOT ARRESTED. THIS, IN TURN, WILL DEPEND IN PART ON A VARIETY OF FACTORS BEYOND MOBUTU'S CONTROL, SUCH AS THE FUTURE COURSE OF WORLD COPPER PRICES, THE SECURITY OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE ROUTES SERVING THE VITAL SHABA REGION AND FURTHER FOREIGN ASSISTANCE INCLUDING ADDITIONAL DEBT RELIEF. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ALL OF THESE

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AREAS HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGING. BUT EVEN IF SUCH OUTSIDE FACTORS REMAIN FAVORABLE, ZAIRE'S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS ARE OF SUCH MAGNITUDE THAT MOBUTU WILL STILL BE REQUIRED TO CARRY THROUGH DIFFICULT FINANCIAL/ECONOMIC REFORMS TO EFFECT FULL RECOVERY AND THEREBY STRENGTHEN HIS POLITICAL POSITION. HERE IS WHERE SOUND ADVICE AND JUDGMENT ON ECONOMIC MATTERS WILL BE OF VITAL IMPORTANCE, AND HERE IS WHERE MOBUTU'S PERSONAL POWERS OF LEADERSHIP -- SO AMPLY DEMONSTRATED IN THE PAST -- WILL HAVE TO BE ASSERTED MORE EFFECTIVELY THAN THEY HAVE BEEN IN RECENT MONTHS.

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